

News Release

510 Desmond Dr., SE
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February 10, 2005

05-015

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Draft Environmental Impact Statement on 9.1-Million Acre Conservation Plan Available for Public Comment

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA-Fisheries (Services) announced today the availability of a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and conservation plan covering future forest practices on approximately 9.1 million acres of non-Federal and non-tribal lands in Washington State. These documents are available for a 90-day public review and comment period. The DEIS is in response to applications made by the Washington Department of Natural Resources on behalf of the State of Washington to the Services for incidental take permits under section 10 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The permits would cover the incidental take of listed and unlisted fish and amphibians associated with otherwise lawful activities regulated under the Washington Forest Practices Rules. The conservation plan also serves as the basis of an application to the Services that they each take steps under section 4(d) of the ESA to limit the application of the prohibition against take of listed salmon, steelhead, and bull trout related to activities regulated under the Washington Forest Practices Rules. The proposed duration of the incidental take permits and conservation plan would be 50 years, although many aspects of the plan's conservation strategy are intended to benefit aquatic species and their habitat long into the future.

Following the listing of bull trout and several salmon species under the ESA in the mid- to late-1990s, stakeholder groups including Federal, State, and local agencies, Tribes, and private forest landowners collaborated to produce a science-based plan known as the Forests and Fish Report to improve water quality and habitat for aquatic species on non-Federal and non-tribal forestlands in Washington, while maintaining a

viable timber industry. The Washington State Legislature endorsed the report and amended the Revised Code of Washington with respect to the Washington Forest Practices Act. The Washington Forest Practices Board, which oversees the Forest Practices Rules, amended the rules to be consistent with the Forests and Fish Report. These amended rules, and other non-regulatory commitments, are incorporated into the State's conservation plan. If the conservation plan is accepted by the Services and the appropriate permits are issued, it will provide a measure of ESA-related regulatory certainty to timber landowners operating within the bounds of the Washington Forest Practices Rules.

The Services formally initiated an environmental review of the project through publication of a Notice of Intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement in the Federal Register on March 17, 2003 (68 FR 12676). That notice also announced a public scoping period during which interested parties were invited to provide written comments expressing their issues or concerns relating to the proposal and to attend one of four public scoping meetings held throughout the State.

The Services will revise the DEIS in a Final Environmental Impact Statement. The Services' decision whether to issue incidental take permits or limits on the application of the prohibition against take will be made upon completion of the Final Environmental Impact Statement and the associated Record of Decision.

Written comments on the proposed conservation plan, proposed implementation agreement, and the DEIS will be accepted for a period of 90 days beginning February 11, 2005 and ending at 5 p.m. Pacific Time on May 12, 2005. Written comments may be sent by mail, facsimile, or e-mail to:

Sally Butts, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
510 Desmond Drive SE, Suite 102
Lacey, WA 98503-1263
FAX: 360/753-9518

Please send e-mail comments to: ForestpracticesHCP.nwr@noaa.gov

Hardbound copies of the proposed conservation plan, proposed implementation agreement, and DEIS are available for viewing, or partial or complete duplication, at all Washington State Libraries and most city and county libraries. The documents will also be available through the Conservation Planning page of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Western Washington Fish and Wildlife Office website at:

<http://westernwashington.fws.gov/consplan/docs.html>. For further information please contact Sally Butts, Project Manager, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 360/753-5832.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas.

It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) is the principal steward of the nation's living marine resources. It protects marine and anadromous species under the Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act. An Agency of the Commerce Department, NOAA Fisheries also regulates the nation's commercial and recreational fisheries. It manages species under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act throughout federal waters, which extend 200 miles from the coastline.

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